

When Jetsons attack! The game that sunk its publisher

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

Everyone's chum - the Amiga - is home to two vastly different games based on Hanna-Barbera's utopian space-age cartoon franchise, The Jetsons. One is a typically awful action-adventure budget affair developed by 221b Software and published by Hi-Tec in 1992, known imaginatively as 'Jetsons: The Computer Game'. The other is a respectable, albeit primitive, point and click adventure known as 'The Jetsons: George Jetson And The Legend of Robotopia' produced by the North American outfit, The Dreamer's Guild, and published by Microillusions in 1989.



Despite the futuristic cartoon having originally aired in 1962, the series staged a comeback revival between 1985 and 1987, as well as spawning two feature-length movies - one of them a Flintstones mash-up! - and was still enjoying regular reruns on British TV many years later. It was no He-man in the toy spin-off extravaganza popularity stakes, yet *was* sufficiently well regarded to warrant a gaming tie-in or two.



A sitcom soap opera of sorts set in 2062, the show revolved around George Jetson, his wife Jane, teenage daughter Judy, six year old precocious genius son Elroy, and talking pet dog Astro, as they go about their daily lives living in an ultra-trendy, Googie-inspired, high-rise Skypad Apartment located in Orbit City. The Jetsons' second pet, an alien called Orbitty was an '80s addition so not part of the inaugural line-up. Apparently he's been known to 'gurble and blurble happily' as he dangles from the ceiling by his slinky-spring legs... whenever he's not disassembling objects and struggling to reassemble them in the correct order (spot the upcoming plot device). Well, it takes allsorts I suppose.

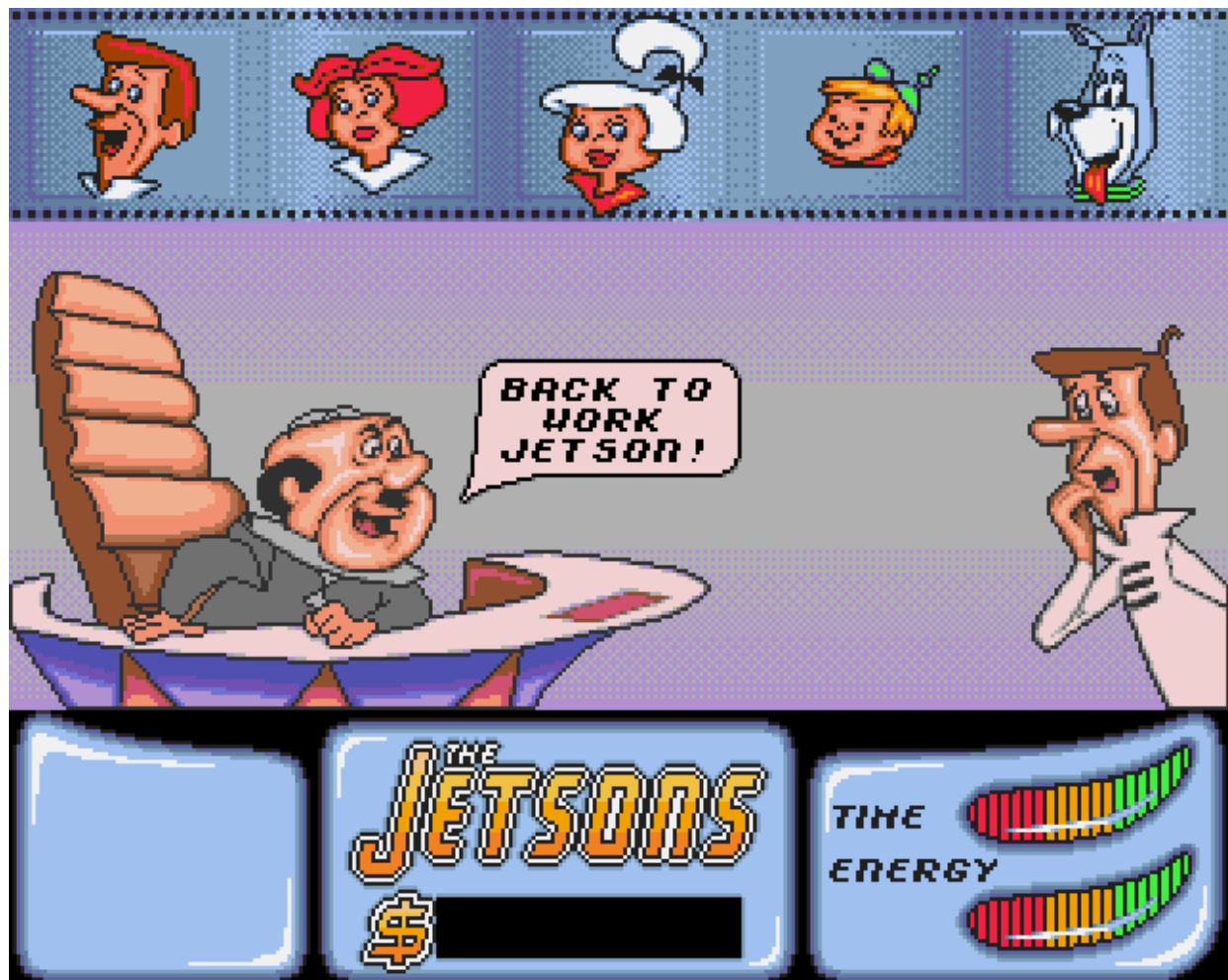


George works at Spacely Space Sprockets doing - well, beyond pushing buttons it's anyone's guess really - for three hours a day, three days a week, travelling to and fro in an 'aerocar'. Waited on by Rosie, the outmoded robot maid, and having embraced the most advanced toil-saving gadgets and gizmos sci-fi has to offer such as instant food dispensers and automated personal groomers, the family need not concern themselves with menial labour. Life is generally pretty cushy... and therein lies much of the slapstick humour. When your existence is *this* undemanding, the slightest effort or inconvenience becomes a vexatious burden, especially when your automated toys malfunction forcing you to think outside the box. Personally I think I'd risk the repercussions if only I could have a dabble with that 'neuronic sleep induction device'.

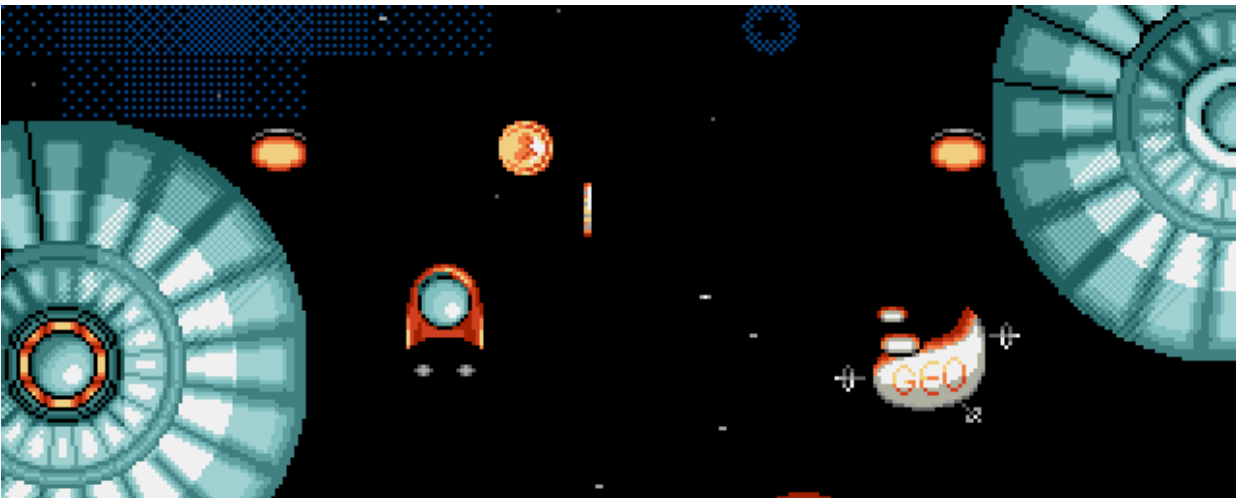


Hi-Tec's contribution to the brand amounted to an overpriced 'budget' flick-screen platformer in which you initially play George who is tasked with tracking down his missing-in-action clan so he can take the afternoon off and visit Las Venus for the weekend, all the while being harangued by Spacely who would rather he didn't. If George goes ahead and leaves before 2pm he risks getting the sack, yet takes the executive decision to go ahead anyway. So the race is on - rally the troops against the clock and make sure you're on that... space shuttle? Is this intergalactic or domestic travel? Sadly the specifics are thin on the ground.





In doing so you get to explore scenery replicated from the cartoon such as the sprocket factory, and also zip off into the sky in your flying saucer bubble car causing the screen orientation to swivel 90 degrees anti-clockwise and switch to an overhead viewpoint. The aim of these sections is to collect coins (and Cosmic Coke cans) to pay for your trip while dodging around airborne hazards.



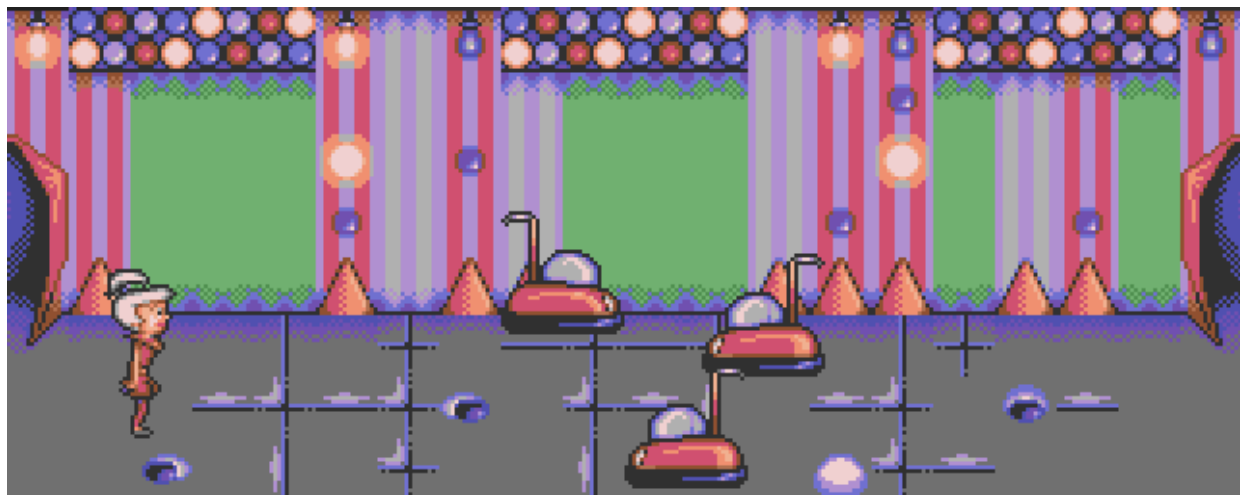
The plot was inspired by episode 13 from series 1 entitled Las Venus, except in the cartoon just George and Jane go on the trip as a second honeymoon. Judy and Elroy are dropped off at Grandma's place in Chicago and Astro is parachuted into a luxury canine plaza, while the happy couple take the skyway in the family aerocar to reach their destination.

In later levels you embody other members of the Jetson family and negotiate your way around their theme appropriate environment. Jane for instance spends her days roaming around her plush newfangled abode, what with this being the early '60s and most women homemakers by trade.

Oddly enough there's no mention of Jane's prevailing passion, *shopping*. Her predicament now is that her des-res is booby-trapped and has been invaded by a cat burglar - fend him off with your robo-dog, Electronimo, and evacuate ASAP to tick this scenario off your to-do list. Well, you know what Dolly Parton had to say about being a woman don't you!



In Judy's stage your challenge is to land a lip-smacker from pop sensation, Jet Screamer (as seen in the cartoon's second episode), who happens to be performing at a funfair. How that helps you get away for the weekend is a complete mystery, then she always was a bit ditzy... aptly demonstrated by forgetting to kiss her heartthrob when they eventually meet. Does flashing him with the hearts you collected along the way count?



Finally, Elroy must escape his spell in detention (meted out by a chimney wearing a mortarboard?) at the Little Dipper School in time to join his family on the trip. Keys are collected and doors opened. Rockets or science need not apply.



Subtasks entail collecting relevant objects and manipulating them to effect changes in your environment, for example, using a wrench to repair a broken elevator. Really though it's just flimsy window dressing on which to hang a marketable license.

Of course I *could* point out that George wakes early to work a maximum of three hours, so why having the afternoon off is a consideration at all is a gaping misnomer of a hole in the plot from the outset... and I *will* do. I *have* done. It's part of my obligations to uphold the nerd code.

Amiga Power saw fit to dedicate no more than a single column to the game, awarding it a dismal 16% score. Scrambling for something positive to say, they *did* remark that the characters represent a good likeness of their TV counterparts, and are well animated.

Amiga Action weren't quite so scathing in their 60% assessment, though still concluded that the game would be a tedious bore for all except the most ardent Jetsons fans.

In fact the most interesting aspect of the Hi-Tec incarnation is the story of how the music for the C64 port came to be as told by Ray Norrish via the EAB...

"Some guy turned up at my house at about 8pm one night and basically, they needed a conversion for the c64 of these modules. I'm sure the guy was from 221b (and I'd already worked for 221b previously), so I agreed a price and said I'd work on it straight away. The guy spent the night in his car outside my house, and in the morning I gave him the c64 versions and went to work. I don't ever recall being paid for it, but certainly remember making the c64 version. I've had a good look myself for any indication as to the original author was, but no luck - just my name".

If it's a Jetsons fix you're craving, a much safer bet would be the earlier interactive fiction title. Once again you star as George who one morning has awoken late due to an autowaker 'failure' and therefore is in the doghouse with his megalomaniac boss. In his defence it must be stressful running a company worth \$1.3b, as indicated by "The 25 Largest Fictional Companies" list compiled by Forbes magazine.

In order to placate Mr Cosmo Spacely and cling to your livelihood you agree to embark on a last ditch mission to

save another wing of his empire, the Robotopia leisure resort. His - and unfortunately now *your* - dilemma is that it's currently under attack from pollution unleashed by a robotic civil war centred around the construction and destruction of a giant segregating wall. How topical!

It's purely a mouse-driven jaunt with a similar interface to the early Lucasarts point and click adventures, however, one whereby commands are issued using simple icons rather than text buttons to 'look', 'open', 'give' and so on, while objects can be collected and stored in an inventory to be deployed later. On-screen events are narrated via text description, yet certain elements of the scenes are also animated and accompanied by audio effects. Your chosen alternative paths or decision tree preferences can be selected in a separate pane, in a similar style to the conversation mode of Monkey Island.

While it was never going to rival the latter, CU Amiga gave it a thumbs up and an 81% grade, congratulating the developers for offering newcomers a gentle introduction to the genre. C&VG concurred, raising the stakes by one percentage point. TGM mostly just described the game mechanics and waffled a bit about the series in general, wrapping up with a 75% score.

Microillusions, rather than knock out any old recycled mini-game medley tat as is customary for licensed fare of this ilk really went the extra mile to set their game apart from the crowd. Remarkably this push to raise the bar is what spelled their doom. To avoid abruptly yanking the player out of the Jetsons universe ambience when flicking back and forth between the manual and game they decided to blend the two mediums together, in effect creating a tutorial comic book incorporating the cast from the TV show.

What they hadn't predicted was Hanna-Barbera's totally erratic overreaction - because Microillusions hadn't specifically sought permission to use the IP for an accompanying paper publication, they flew off the handle, cancelling their lucrative contract to produce additional titles based on Hanna-Barbera's other cartoon franchises: Scooby-Doo (under development by Sculptured Software), Jonny Quest and the Splinter of Heaven, and The Flintstones, none of which were officially released despite being predominantly complete. A lack of financial return for the development time and effort invested was cited as a major contributing factor in Microillusions' subsequent bankruptcy in 1990.

Jonny Quest was eventually released by Hollyware as 'Curse of the Mayan Warriors' in 1993 for the DOS platform. Ironically, California-based Hollyware Entertainment was formed by Dave Boyles in 1991, an ex-employee of Microillusions, also at one time based in California, though not in the same office - that would have been *too* much of a giveaway!

Sheffield-based studio Hi-Tec went on to publish an entirely different Scooby-Doo game (also featuring Scrappy-Doo) in 1991, while no further Flintstones games appeared for the Amiga beyond Teque's 1988 release. Some members of The Dreamer's Guild later regrouped to found The Wyrmskeep Entertainment Co. from whom you can purchase contemporary remakes of Inherit the Earth and The Labyrinth of Time.

Fast-forward to 2014 and one of Microillusions near-complete titles, The Adventures of Scooby-Doo, has now been made available for the C64 (though not Amiga or PC as originally intended) thanks to the combined efforts of Games that Weren't and one of the original developers, coder Peter Ward. The fate of the others still hangs in the balance.

As for Hanna-Barbera Productions, they went on to bring their pie-in-the-sky future-tech into fruition, creating the computer virus, smartwatch, computer tablet, treadmill, sunbed, travelator, flat-screen 3D TV, iRobot Roomba vacuum cleaner, and Skype. That's exactly how it happened, I swear.

